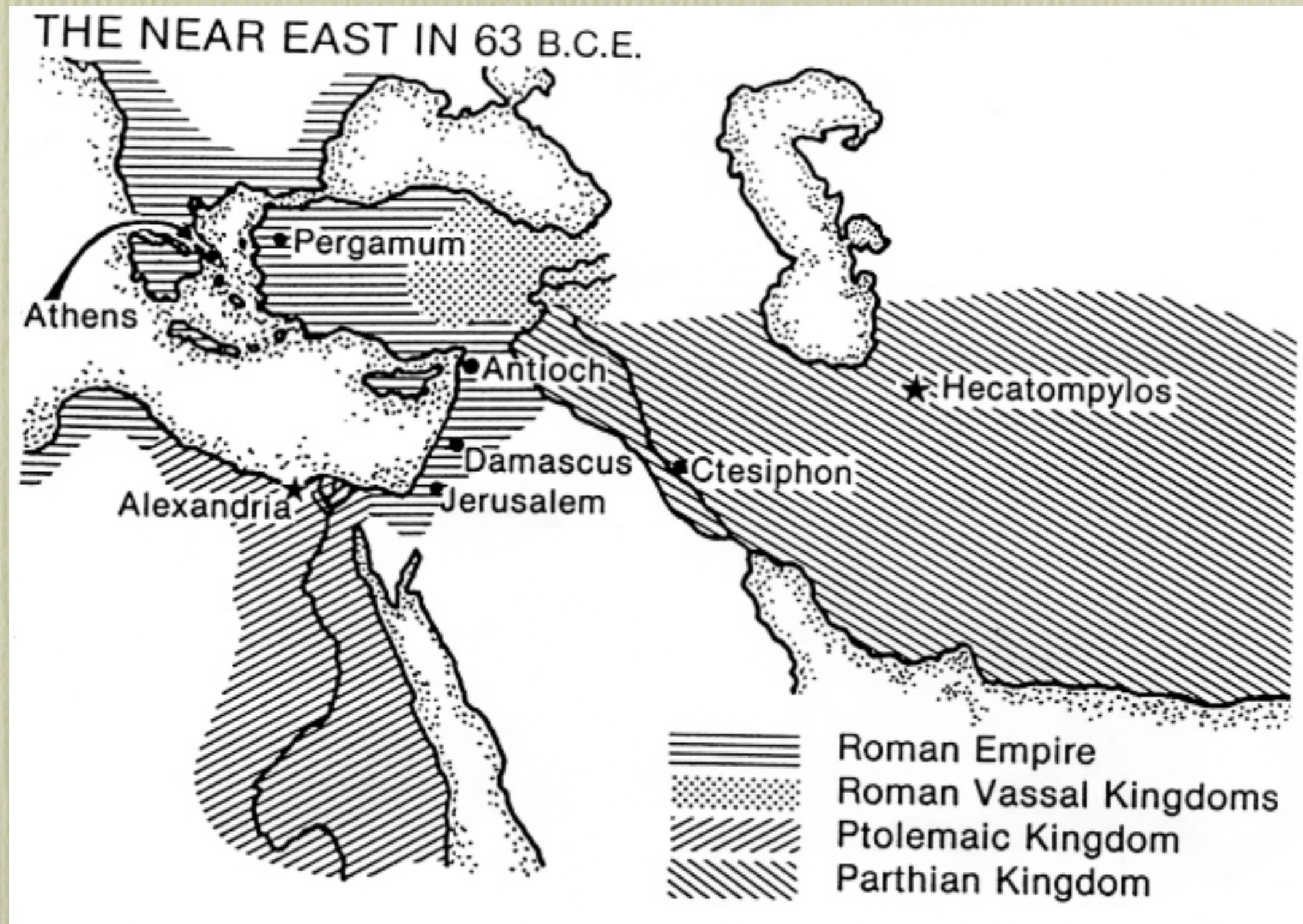


## 17. Judah from the 2nd to the 1st century BC



In 198BC Antiochus III, ruler of Syria from 223 to 187BC, defeated Ptolemy V of Egypt (203-180BC) at Panias, the northernmost point of Palestine. However, through fear of Rome, he did not follow up the victory by attacking Egypt. In 197BC he made peace with Ptolemy V by promising him his daughter, Cleopatra, in marriage (see Daniel 11:17). This plan failed because his daughter sided with her husband, urging an alliance between Egypt and Rome. Antiochus III established Coele-syria (the region of Syria which included Palestine). Initially the people of Judah welcomed what appeared to be liberation from heavy Egyptian taxation.

Antiochus invaded Greece in 192BC, but was defeated by Rome at Thermopylae. In 190BC the Romans, under Scipio drove Antiochus out of Asia Minor (see Daniel 11:18). The Taurus mountains became the new western boundary of the Seleucid empire.



Antiochus's son, later to rule as Antiochus IV, was taken as a hostage to Rome where he lived in luxury for fourteen years (190-176BC). Rome imposed upon Syria a huge yearly tribute. This created the need for heavy taxation, including taxation of Judah. In 187BC Antiochus III died attempting to sack a temple to help pay his tribute to Rome. He was succeeded by his son, Seleucus IV Philopator (see Daniel 11:20). 2Maccabees 3:1-20 recounts his pillaging of the temple in Jerusalem as part of his attempt to raise money to pay Rome. Seleucus was assassinated in 175 and was succeeded by his younger brother, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who ruled Syria from 175 to 164BC

## The Wisdom of Ben Sira (Sirach)

Yeshua, son of Eleazar, and grandson of Sira (hence 'Ben Sira'), was a Jewish teacher, living and working in Jerusalem at the beginning of the second century BC (see Sirach 50:27). He studied the Torah, the Prophets and the other Writings that were the sacred heritage of his people, and he spent his life communicating the fruits of his study to his Jewish students. At a time when Greek culture (Hellenism) was influencing the whole region, including Judah, he wanted his students to appreciate the wisdom of their own traditions. In his teaching he drew on these traditions, especially on the wisdom contained in the Book of Proverbs, and applied it to the changed circumstances at the beginning of the second century BC.

Sirach is a book of 'wisdom', a word that can mean practical skill in some field, including the tact and diplomacy required in social relations. It is used also for a share in the very Wisdom of God – something made possible by God in revealing the Torah to Moses. Ben Sira received all this from the tradition. To this traditional wisdom he added a deep appreciation of the beauty of the temple cult, and the role of the priesthood in the worshipping community.

Ben Sira speaks of the importance of forgiveness (see 28:2-7) but he does not extend this forgiveness to one's enemies, and he remains locked in the prejudices of his contemporaries, especially in relation to the Samaritans.

‘Two nations my soul detests, and the third is not even a people:  
Those who live in Seir, and the Philistines,  
and the foolish people that live in Shechem’(Sirach 50:25-26).

He also assumes that males are superior. There are no women mentioned in his long list of the illustrious ancestors of his people (Sirach 44-49), and his teaching on marriage is only from the male perspective. The fact that he is teaching young males may go part of the way to explain this, but some of his remarks in regard to women are stunningly biased (see, for example, Sirach 25:19).

‘If you do good, know to whom you do it,  
and you will be thanked for your good deeds.  
Do good to the devout, and you will be repaid—  
if not by them, certainly by the Most High.  
No good comes to one who persists in evil  
or to one who does not give alms.  
Give to the devout, but do not help the sinner.  
Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly;  
hold back their bread, and do not give it to them,  
for by means of it they might subdue you;  
then you will receive twice as much evil  
for all the good you have done to them.  
For the Most High also hates sinners  
and will inflict punishment on the ungodly.  
Give to the one who is good, but do not help the sinner’(Sirach 12:1-7).

## The Book of Baruch

The Baruch Scroll purports to be written by Baruch, known from the Jeremiah scroll as Jeremiah's secretary (see Jeremiah 36:1-32 and 43:1-7). All the versions we have can be traced back to the Greek Septuagint. The scroll consists of four originally separate compositions. There is no evidence of the book as such ever existing in Hebrew, though it is probable that the text we have is a compilation of separate Greek translations from documents originally composed in Hebrew.

The compiler of the Baruch scroll appears to be part of the circle of learned teachers in Jerusalem, devoted to the study and promotion of the traditions of Israel some time early in the second century BC, prior to the Hasmonaean revolt (168BC). Unlike the Book of Daniel, for example, he does not distinguish between the faithful and the unfaithful. He calls on everyone to acknowledge their sinfulness as a people. He also expects redemption to come, not in the afterlife, but through divine intervention in this world.

## Judah under Antiochus IV (175-164BC)

Things took a turn for the worse in Judah with the accession to the throne of Antiochus IV in 175BC. Daniel refers to him as a 'contemptible person'(Daniel 11:21), and in verses 21-24 writes of Antiochus's usurping the throne and his early rule.

Antiochus IV became more and more aggressive in his determination to wipe out Judaism and turn Jerusalem into a Greek city. Some Jews saw accommodation to Hellenization as the only way to ensure the survival of Judaism. Others saw the advantages of giving away their faith and taking on Greek ways. Others, however, stubbornly resisted every attempt to compromise the practices of their ancient faith.

On the 15th Chislev 167BC (December 6; see 1Maccabees 1:54), as part of enforcing his decree, Antiochus IV erected a statue of Zeus in the temple sanctuary. This is the “abomination of desolation” mentioned in the Book of Daniel (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) and, in the Newer Testament, in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 24:15). Daniel 11:36-39 writes of Antiochus’s blasphemous behaviour. The temple became a place for drunken orgies and debauchery. This set the stage for the uprising recorded in the First Book of Maccabees.

Mattathias, a priest of the Hasmon clan (hence the founder of the 'Hasmonean dynasty'), led an insurrection against the Syrians. Upon his death in 166BC, his son Judas (166-160), nicknamed the 'Maccabee' ('hammer'), took over leadership of the movement and defeated the Syrian army in three successive guerilla campaigns, finally recapturing Jerusalem. In 164BC on the 25th Chislev (16th December), the temple was re-consecrated and worship restored.

## The Book of Daniel

Another strand of resistance to the policies of Antiochus IV is that demonstrated in the Book of Daniel, published at this time. The authors of the Book of Daniel did not approve of the violent methods of the Maccabees, though they do admit that it did provide ‘a little help’(Daniel 11:34). Their call was for fidelity to the covenant, even at the price of losing one’s life. They saw the suffering as purifying the nation (Daniel 11:35). Victory over the pagan oppressors was to be a work of God not man. YHWH(not Antiochus) is the Lord of history. The stories collected in the Book of Daniel show that it is possible to live under foreign domination, and even to find advancement.

This is something that the great prophet Jeremiah advised: ‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to YHWH on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare’(Jeremiah 29:7).

They must, however, like Daniel, remain faithful to their God and to their Jewish traditions. They must not submit to the demands of Antiochus that they renounce their faith. They broke new ground by insisting that not even death could separate the faithful Jews from their God.

Situating Daniel among the exiles in Babylon is a literary device aimed at those undergoing persecution from Antiochus, to remind them of an earlier period of persecution in which the foreign power (Babylon) was wiped out, and the exiles emerged victorious (returning to rebuild Judah). The Book of Daniel was a timely reminder of God's fidelity to those who remain faithful to the covenant. It is a manifesto encouraging people to be faithful and to trust their God who is the one who controls history. Antiochus will not have the last word any more than did the Babylonian rulers three hundred years earlier. If they remain faithful to the covenant, they, like their forebears in Babylon, will experience redemption.

## An Apocalypse

An apocalypse is “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an other worldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involved another, supernatural world”. To this may be added that the genre normally serves “to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority”(Collins page 54).

Some apocalypses involve a journey into another world. Daniel is a historical apocalypse. It focuses on people's present experience in this world. The meaning of their experience is revealed via a symbolic vision. The transcendence of God is acknowledged in that the revelation is mediated through an angel who interprets the vision. This also demonstrates that the meaning is beyond the power of human interpretation. The persecuted Jewish community is to look beyond human decisions, and see what is happening with the eyes of a 'seer' to whom is revealed the spiritual struggle between the supernatural forces of good and evil, with the ultimate victory of God assured. Those who survive will experience God's blessing, but so, too, will those who die a martyr's death. They will be raised by God to enjoy divine communion (and so life) for ever.

The beneficiary of the revelation is a figure from the past who is portrayed as foreseeing the historical events which the anonymous authors are concerned to interpret. This 'foreseeing' is a reminder to the audience that what they are experiencing comes within the over arching providence of God. They have nothing to fear so long as they remain faithful.

While the focus of the book is on the circumstances of the persecution of 167-164, its message transcends any particular historical setting (see the Book of Revelation in the Newer Testament). No human kingdom lasts for ever, and human hope for those faithful to the covenant is not for this world only.

From Ben Sira 48:20 and 49:6-10, composed a generation before Daniel, it appears that the list of the prophetic scrolls had been fixed. In the Jewish Bible Daniel is included among the Writings (not the Prophets). Appropriately, Daniel is listed after Esther. However in the Greek Septuagint (followed by the Latin Vulgate), Daniel is included among the prophetic scrolls. If Jonah is considered a book of prophecy, there is no fundamental argument against including Daniel (see Matthew 24:15). Its focus, after all, like that of all the prophetic books, is not on history but on YHWH.

‘Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be **thrown into a furnace of blazing fire**’(Daniel 3:6).

‘They will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’(parable of the weeds: Matthew 13:42).

‘They will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’(parable of the fishing net: Matthew 13:50).

‘As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’(Daniel 7:13).

Matthew 26:64

Jesus’ words to the high priest

Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you,  
From now on **you will see the Son of Man**  
**seated at the right hand of Power**  
**and coming on the clouds of heaven.**

Matthew 24:30

This is also found included in Matthew’s ‘Eschatological Discourse’

## Matthew 24:15

This is found in Matthew's 'eschatological discourse'

“So when you see ‘**the desolating sacrilege**’ (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).  
standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet  
Daniel.”



## The First Book of Maccabees

Published probably some time in the first decade of the first century BC when Alexander Jannaeus (his Hebrew name was Jonathan) was high priest and king of the Jews. Alexander Jannaeus was a son and successor of John Hyrcanus (high priest and king from 134 to 104), whose father, Simon, was high priest before him (from 143 to 134). Simon succeeded his brother Jonathan (high priest from 152 to 143), and they were both brothers of the famous Judas Maccabaeus ('the hammer') whose brilliance as a military commander set the stage for the Jews achieving independence from their Syrian overlords. So central is Judas to this story that the history came to be called 'The First Book of Maccabees'.

The anonymous historian responsible for First Maccabees sets out to record the history of the Jewish uprising and the achievement of Jewish independence. To appreciate the importance of this independence we have only to remember that Judah had been continuously under foreign rule since 598BC when Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians. The First Book of Maccabees covers the period from the accession of Antiochus IV Epiphanes to the throne of Syria in 175BC to the death of the high priest, Simon, in 134BC.

The author of 1 Maccabees writes in support of the dynastic claims of the Hasmonaeans to rule the Jews as their high priest.

## The Second Book of Maccabees

The author of the Second Book of Maccabees states in the Preface to his work that he is offering a condensed version of a five volume history by Jason of Cyrene (see 2Maccabees 2:23). Jason's history has not survived. Whereas 1Maccabees begins with the reign of Antiochus IV, who ruled Syria from 175 to 164, 2Maccabees takes us back to the previous reign of Antiochus's brother, Seleucus IV (187-175). He goes only as far as 160BC when Judas Maccabaeus is at the height of his power, having defeated the Syrian army led by Nicanor.

Jason of Cyrene acknowledges the providential role played by Judas Maccabaeus, but his focus is on God, who miraculously intervened because of the heroism of the martyrs and because of the blasphemous behaviour of the enemies of the Jews. Judas was God's instrument, and Jason is not in favour of the Hasmonaeans. Not only does he represent an opposing view to that espoused by the author of 1Maccabees, it is possible that he composed his history precisely to counter what he saw as 1Maccabees's propaganda

The author of 2Maccabees made his condensed version to spread Jason's ideas more widely. Jason is perhaps drawing on the memoirs of Onias IV (131-129), who was in exile in Egypt and who was the rightful high priest. He saw the Hasmonaeans as usurpers.

## The Book of Judith

The Book of Judith is a story. Its hero is an observant woman who manages to do what no nation and no other person could do: she humiliates the most powerful army of the apparently invincible tyrant who rules the world and who is determined to crush the Jewish people. The tyrant in the story is the well known Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of the Neo-Babylonian Empire who was responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the exile of the last king of Judah and the leading citizens in the early years of the sixth century BC. That the story is not actually about Nebuchadnezzar is made clear by the author, whose fictitious Nebuchadnezzar is said to be ruler of Assyria and to have his capital in Nineveh (see Judith 1:1). The reader is expected to see him as a figure for any nation and ruler who sets out to oppress Judah.

We are to look for the meaning of the story, not at the level of historical or geographical fact, but rather in the characterisation, especially, but not only, of the heroine, Judith. Her victory is set in a fictitious town in Samaria. If the Jews can prevail in 'Bethulia'(Judith 4:6), they can prevail anywhere. The author is making the point that if a widow can defeat the general of the largest army in the world, Judaism can defeat the nations that are determined to destroy her, so long as the Jews, like Judith, remain faithful to YHWH and to their traditions. Their situation may appear impossible, and their enemies may appear invincible, but only YHWH is invincible, and YHWH is committed to his people. They must never lose faith or abandon their way of life.

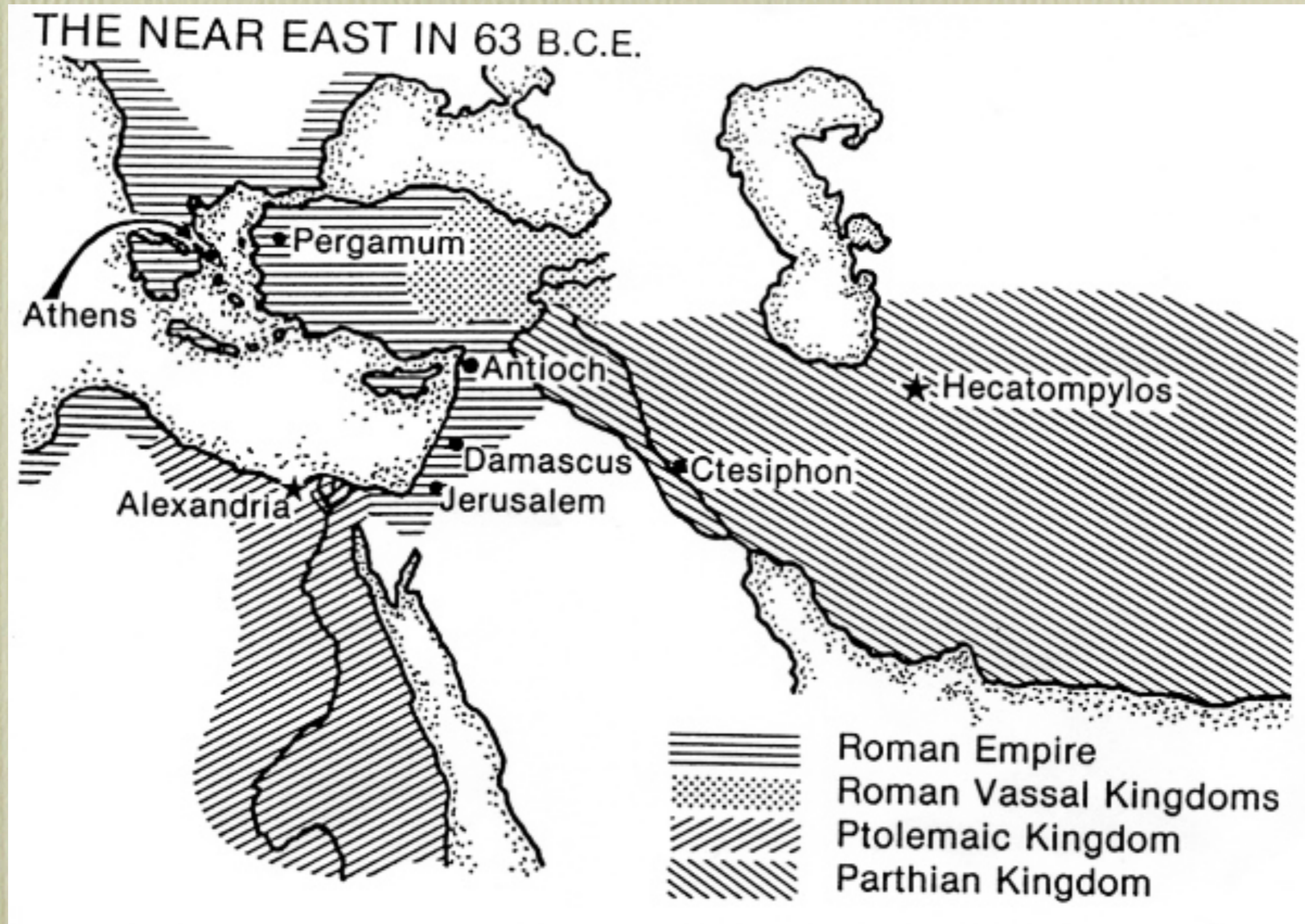
## Judith 9:11-12

“For your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on powerful men. You are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, saviour of those without hope. Please, please, God of my father, God of the heritage of Israel, Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, King of all your creation, hear my prayer!”

## Judah under Roman rule

We have already noted the defeat of the Seleucids by the Roman army under Scipio in 190BC. The Seleucids were driven out of Asia Minor, and the Taurus mountains became the new western boundary of the Seleucid empire. We have already noted also some of the effects of the heavy indemnity that the Seleucid rulers had to pay Rome. In 148BC Macedonia was established as a Roman province. It was the base for the extension of Roman power into Anatolia. In 63BC Pompey intervened in the civil war between Hyrcanus and Aristobulus. This resulted in Judah being absorbed into the Roman Empire. It was placed under the supervision of the governor of Syria.

# Roman Occupation



## The Wisdom of Solomon (The Book of Wisdom)

We do not know the name of the author of The Wisdom of Solomon. He was a Jew living and teaching in Alexandria probably during the Roman period, that is, sometime in the last decades of the first century BC or the early decades of the first century AD. There are many parallels with the writings of his contemporary, Philo (c. 25BC– 45AD), the most famous Jew living in Alexandria at the time.

It is evident from his writing that the author of *The Wisdom of Solomon* was well versed in the Jewish Scriptures, and also in Hellenist religious and philosophical thought.

If Judaism remained locked into the traditional Hebrew way of looking at the world, there was a danger that non-Jews would see Judaism as standing in the way of civilization, human progress, and the unity of mankind to which they aspired. To counteract this our author encouraged his students to engage with Hellenist thought, while recognising its limits and defects, and to value the special contribution their own Jewish traditions could make to the culture. He writes enthusiastically of the temple (Wisdom 9:8), the Torah (Wisdom 18:4), the heroes of Israel (Wisdom 10:1-21), and begins his work by referring to the prophetic ideal of justice (Wisdom 1:1). It is their privileged mission as Jews to offer the world **‘the incorruptible light of the Torah’**(Wisdom 18:4).

Another feature of life in Alexandria at the time was the mystical cult of the Egyptian goddess, Isis. This, too, had many attractions for a Jew who was keen to find a place in the vibrant world that was Alexandria. This was especially attractive in light of the fact that they did not have a temple in Alexandria and so felt the absence of the cult that was so important to their fellow Jews in Judah.



Queen of the Throne

Sister and wife of Osiris, the god of the afterlife and the dead

His Jewish students for whom this work is composed must have been educated in Greek literature, philosophy, rhetoric and science, as well as in their own Jewish traditions. Their teacher is encouraging them to learn from the best of Hellenist philosophy and religion, but he is insisting that God had chosen for them a priceless gift to offer their contemporaries. The key point that our author makes throughout the book is that what was good in Hellenist culture was a gift of divine Wisdom from YHWH, the personal God who chose to reveal himself to the Jews.

The highest expression of divine Wisdom is the Torah, and the Torah is God's corrective to the errors in Hellenist thought, and the means of bringing to perfection its limited insights. Our author's hope is that this will also appeal to the cultured non-Jews in Alexandria who were attracted to Judaism.

Neither the Book of Proverbs nor the Wisdom of Ben Sira envisaged a life of communion with God after physical death. Under the influence of Hellenist thought, our author embraced the idea of human beings consisting of matter informed by a soul. With physical death the matter corrupts. The soul, however, is immortal. However, here again, he understood our immortality differently. For Plato the soul was innately indestructible. For our author, it is God who graciously offers eternal communion to those who welcome his gift of Wisdom. It is divine Wisdom that takes the initiative (Wisdom 6:13). We are being offered this communion even before we become conscious of its influence (Wisdom 7:12). It is divine Wisdom that is the source of all virtue (Wisdom 8:7). It is only through the gift of Wisdom that we can come to know the will of God and respond to it (Wisdom 9:17).

In Part One (Wisdom 1:1 - 6:21) the author focuses on our eternal destiny: communion with God. Divine Wisdom is God's gift drawing us into this communion, which we will enjoy only if we seek the Lord (Wisdom 1:1), by welcoming Wisdom and living accordingly (Wisdom 6:9).

In Part Two (Wisdom 6:22 - 10:21) he offers detailed instructions on what we are to do to obtain God's gift of eternal blessedness. We are to take divine Wisdom as our bride (Wisdom 8:2), and live justly by seeking and obeying Wisdom.

In Part Three (Wisdom 11:1 - 19:22) he invites the reader to reflect on God's providence as seen in the Exodus.